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Correspondance and Commentary

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VIII. COMMENTS AND CORRESPONDANCE

*COMMENT on 'Survey Research Data: Misuse or Misunderstanding?',

the Review of Shyam Thapa.

by Graham Clarke, Oxford University

The last issue of the Research Bulletin (Vol. II, No. 3, 1982) published a commentary on The Use or Misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal (Kathmandu, 1979), that followed from the review in the previous issue (Vol. II, No. 2, 1982). Without in any way wishing to cast doubt on the utility of statistical analysis when applied to accurate data, or on population studies or the work of the FP/MCH (Family Planning/Maternal and Child Health) Project of Nepal, I think some further comment is needed here to correct the impression of statistical naivety that Thapa's comments give.

In an ultimate sense, there are no real answers as to which particular methodological instruments are suitable for social research in Nepal. How could there be, given the vast variety of conditions and topics? And certainly investigators have their biases. Mr. Thapa is perfectly correct here: but not when it comes to practical applied issues.

The best that anyone can do in practice is to try to be sensitive to various ways of looking at problems, and to attempt to find out what is happening from a number of different perspectives. The authors of The Use and Misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal have done this, combining their vast field-experience (with and without questionnaires) in Nepal, in a study explicitly designed to show the problems of survey techniques in semi-literate, non-western communities. To those with such direct experience their points are obvious and need no belaboring. The work is directed to those without this experience, moreover to those whose training predisposes them to statistical methods, as a caution and corrective.

The issues they raise are 'black and white' without any shades of grey. Their findings are similarly clearcut, and given their practical experience of development survey work make an authoritative critique of much such work carried out in Nepal. In the language of statistics, some of their results are as follows:

- 1) survey error greatly exceeded the 5-10% commonly allowed for sampling error,
- 2) on landownership, income and crop-yields error was in the order of 200%,
- 3) for grain-trading error was in the order of 600%,
- 4) 80% of people were unable to understand complete questionnaires,
- 5) 91% of people did not understand words commonly used in questionnaires.

They detail how respondent reluctance, rather than lack of knowledge, is the main source of error both for economic issues and family-planning.

To put some of the above in everyday terms, people do not like saying how much they earn, make or own to their relatives, let alone to strangers; nor do young women, when sitting with half a dozen relatives and a male stranger, like confessing to knowledge of the condom (especially if the verb is the transitive form *cinnu*). One really doesn't have to have a massive cross-cultural experience to understand why this should be so -- there are precious few cultures in the world where this is not so. What is more particular to the Nepalese situation is the fact that the national language is still a second language, at times poorly understood, to large sections of the population. Mr. Thapa's comments completely miss these points.

The issue is not one within statistical theory, to be dealt with by bias in gender sample. Certainly one can agree that sex stratification is a significant factor -- if one chooses to use such a ponderous term for the fact that men and women often meet together and talk about things differently. But to assume from this that in the hills of Nepal men do not talk and convey their knowledge to their wives, sisters, mothers and daughters in their homes is a slightly far-fetched assumption. Here Campbell *et al* make the only telling point: namely that one is asking for trouble in having male interviewers questioning women in front of their families about contraception. Perhaps more importantly, they point out how cultural differences may be such between interviewer and interviewee that the questionnaire, whatever its replicability, does not serve as an indicator for anything else than itself. Context, and the people's own culture and categories, are the issues to which any investigator must attend if he wishes to obtain results which are accurate.

Replicability is one thing; reliability, in the sense in which non-statisticians use the term, is something quite different. Those who use computers are quite familiar with the adage "rubbish in/rubbish out", and this clearly applies to data which is inaccurate by more than a complete order of magnitude. To assume that one can apply a simple 'correcting factor' to make meaning out of nonsense is a basic logical error.

Mr. Thapa has concentrated solely on one aspect of their work, family-planning. This seems to have been selected on the grounds that here some statistical objections can be raised, that is if certain assumptions are made. He ignores the main argument of the work, and couches his criticisms solely in the language of statisticians. That such blindness should afflict a western demographer is one thing; that an educated and evidently able Nepalese social scientist should choose to downplay common-sense experience and practical knowledge of his own culture and life in favour of the reductionism of that malleable western social science, is quite another.

One looks to social scientists such as Mr. Thapa to temper and correct the excesses of our applied science in Nepal, rather than to accentuate them. I am sure that all applied social scientists in Nepal, including many of the scholars to whom he refers, would hope that he direct his energies away from blurring over clearcut issues towards the constructive and sensitive use of survey methods, like the authors of The Use and Misuse of Social Science Research in Nepal suggest.